



# Using Formal vs. Informal Language

Even though speaking and writing are both means of conveying information to people, there are some differences between them. One reason for this is that most academic writing demands more formality and regularity than informal speaking does. It is always important to evaluate your writing for formality.

## Things to Consider:

1. Who is the audience? (professor, peer, general scholarly reader)
2. How does the audience expect to receive the message?
3. How formal is the project you are working on? (research paper vs. narrative essay)

## When do I write formally?

- When writing in almost all academic genres <sup>1</sup>
- Any time a professor expects it to be a formal assignment (research papers, case studies, etc.)

### *When Writing Formally...*

1. Avoid using colloquial words and expressions (gonna, wanna, etc.)
2. Avoid contractions. Substitute "it is" for "it's"
3. Write in third person. Do not use "I" or "you"

## When do I write informally?

- When writing for personal use
- When writing dialogue and conversations
- When writing on most social media
- In an outline for a paper

### *When Writing Informally...*

1. Colloquialisms are okay
2. Contractions are okay
3. First, second, or third person can be utilized

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<sup>1</sup> The Kathleen Jones White Writing Center can help you determine what genre you are writing in.

It is always important to read over your work aloud after completing it to smooth it out and check for mistakes. Always keep your message clear to your reader, remember your audience, and maintain one tone throughout your paper. Remember that each professor grades differently, so it is crucial to be clear with them about what they want and allow in a paper.

Some professors care a great deal about grammar and sentence mechanics, and others care more about seeing the way you “think” through your writing and seeing your strong ideas on the page.

Keep in mind that these are blanket suggestions that do not cover every time of writing assignment you have in college. For example, you might take an English 101 class where your professor asks you to write a personal narrative about an important event in your life. In this case, it would be perfectly acceptable to use “I” and take on an informal tone! At the same time, your professor might not want you to use colloquialisms like “gonna”.

Each writing situation is different. Therefore, you should check to make sure you understand the guidelines for the type of writing you are doing — and if you aren’t sure, ask your professor!